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Lone Wolf Against the Kremlin

By ERIKA HOLZER

Question for freedom lovers everywhere: What, in your wildest imagining, would you like to see happen to the government of the Soviet Union?

Robert Moss has one answer. In his breath-stopping political thriller, "Moscow Rules" (Villard Books, 389 pages, \$16.95) the plot turns on the question of whether one man can succeed "at what few before him dreamed possible": Can he bring down the Soviet system without war?

The author's considerable novelistic powers and impeccable research make



Bookshelf

"Moscow Rules"
By Robert Moss

such a coup seem plausible. Much has been said about the KGB both in fact and fiction, but Mr. Moss deposits us on less familiar terrain: the inner sanctum of the Soviet military establishment. Our guide is a Soviet general named Preobrazhensky—a name that, for him, carries a solemn responsibility. It stands for a long line of valiant soldiers, from the ancestor who died fighting Napoleon at the gates of Moscow, to the father he never knew who earned a hero's medal fighting the Nazis. "The men in this house have always been defenders," Sasha Preobrazhensky's grandmother instills in him as a boy.

But it is the system's betrayal of his murdered father that leaves history student Sasha grimly determined to bring down the state. For his secret motto, he takes a Russian proverb: "If you live with wolves, howl like them." Concealing his opposition to Communist ideology, he embarks on his self-appointed mission, with no regard for the personal cost.

At the outset of his career, he turns his

back on the awakening dissident movement ("You can't break an ax with a whip"), makes himself useful to the party and earns the contempt of the woman he loves—and loses. He rejects a proffered KGB job and joins the military, where his rise is calculated and swift. He marries the pampered daughter of a general as a shortcut "to the top of the military establishment," and becomes the protégé of this old soldier and survivor of purges. He hones his skills on harsh assignments, immersing himself in all things military, including a brief stint at the "Aquarium," nerve center of military intelligence; a vital training period with "Spetsnaz," elite special forces officer corps, experts at political warfare; an espionage-related posting at the Soviet Mission in New York; an eye-opening battlefield experience in Afghanistan. He earns promotions, cultivates contacts, makes friends in high places. He bides his time.

Not everything about the single-minded Preobrazhensky is calculated, however. He has never forgotten the woman he lost, and he falls in love with her mirror image, an American woman with roots in his own country. Their passion becomes the weak link in the chain he has forged all these years, her reluctant involvement with the CIA a threat to his accelerating timetable. Will Soviet Major-General Alexander "Sasha" Preobrazhensky's coup succeed?

The skillfully crafted plot keeps the reader racing toward the final chapter for the answer. But "Moscow Rules" reaches beyond the conventional thriller. It shows us that fascinating Soviet phenomenon, the soldier's soldier, dedicated to the army, disgusted with party machinations and the stench of corruption, silent critic of the system. So convincing are Preobrazhensky and his colleagues that you wonder about their true-life counterparts. So sympathetically are they drawn that you are tempted to forgive them their trespasses and dwell

only on their humanity: Zotov, a bulldozer of a man with the stomach for a fight but none for politics; Zaytsev, commander of the Spetsnaz brigade, as critical of the regime as he is proud of his peasant origins; the relentlessly sociable Feliks Nikolsky, KGB man with a conscience, who yearns for a Russia "in which God and the people will be rehabilitated like the survivors of Stalin's terror."

The characterization is consistent enough that Preobrazhensky, for all his heroic dimension, is first, last and always a Soviet soldier, spawned by a dictatorship with global designs. In Afghanistan, for example, his sympathy is reserved for the demoralized Soviet soldier, his anger for Politburo bungling. Indifferent to the suffering of Afghans defending their country, he rationalizes the invasion as "a straightforward military operation to defend his country's frontiers."

Mr. Moss writes perceptively and with the sure hand of a man who knows his facts, not surprising for a recognized authority on espionage and terrorism. His descriptive passages come alive with telling simile: GRU headquarters "with bars in the windows like a jail or a Victorian madhouse"; a deceptive spring where "cold winds snapped in the streets . . . like the whiplash of a winter that refused to die"; the Central Committee—men with "faces like cracked ice, faces like pillows squashed and pummeled out of shape through many sleepless nights, faces of weary, cynical survivors."

"Moscow Rules," in the final analysis, is a winning combination of grim reality and fantasy, as witness the reaction of a friend who read it: "How long," he said wistfully, "must we wait?"

Erika Holzer is a lawyer turned novelist.